

Michael Finley, THE MEGAPODE

The Megapode

by Michael Finley

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when courage goes out the door,
love comes innuendum

The year was 1932; the day was a Thursday, the fourth of August -- or Friday the fifth, depending on which side of the International Date Line the battered DC-3 was now on. From his lone seat in the passenger compartment, Father Patrick MacConacht watched the blinking light on the pilot's right wing. From time to time a sheet of lightning far off over the Pacific would illuminate just how islandless the great sea was. The only relief between ocean and firmament was the sinister and vaguely Wagnerian army of thunderheads enlisting to the east.

There, he thought: something else to be grateful to God for, that his interviews on the Solomons had not coincided with one of their biweekly typhoons. His Irish luck was holding fast.

The original headmaster and rector of the minor seminary back in Bucks County, Pennsylvania -- a Monsignor Grassins -- used to joke that MacConacht, once ordained, would give new meaning to

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Patrick MacConacht might not be brilliant, but he was the best the Bernards had, and he knew it. During his years at The Bluff and later at major seminary he impressed with his quickness, and, in his argumentations, his knack for deft dispatch. It was therefore no surprise when, upon his ordination in 1932, MacConacht was assigned to two years of additional study and service as adjunct to the Society's Vatican headquarters and as research assistant for the Office of the Promoter of the Faith. What was a surprise, however, was that the first case to come before the Promoter's desk under MacConacht's tenure there was the petition for the canonization of the hero of his own order, Bernard de Veaux, the so-called Eleventh Martyr of Oceania.

Sending MacConacht to work for the Promoter seemed an excellent idea at the time. In Rome the young priest would have the opportunity to brandish his already formidable skills in debate. It was the ulterior wish, however, of Grassins and the others that the young firebrand be humbled at the Curia's competent hands.

Something went wrong. The Society had misunderstood the nature of the Office of the Promoter of the Faith. The Promoter was

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not the man entrusted with promoting Bernard de Veaux' cause. To the contrary: the Promoter of the Faith was the Devil's Advocate. Thus the reckless reformer within the Society was suddenly in a position to wreck it from without.

The Society did right to worry, Patrick MacConacht thought to himself high over the Pacific. Early on he had established for himself a guiding principle: that loyalty to his order would have no bearing on the manner in which he prosecuted its most hallowed figure. The order would have to understand that it must not expect Patrick MacConacht to compromise that standard for the sake of lifting up to the stature of Peter, Joseph, Francis and Paul the likes of a provincial banality named Bernard de Veaux.

Patrick MacConacht closed his eyes and smiled. His mission to the leper mission on Chotako had been a personal success, and on his lap sat the dossier which would not only forever bar the mediocre Bernard de Veaux from canon and calendar, but was also a testament to Father MacConacht's professionalism; for he had bucked the interests of the order which had nurtured and ordained him for a higher allegiance, for the banner of Rome. And a share of Rome's glory would be his proper reward, once he turned the dossier over to the Promoter, an old guinea named Peruzzi whose ambition it was to wear red.

And these were the facts in the matter of the life of Bernard de Veaux, missionary:

+ Up until April of 1963, the month when the newly ordained Father de Veaux left his home in Clermont-Ferrand to minister to the lepers of the Solomons -- that is to say, during that period in which our most reliable witnesses had intercourse with him -- Bernard de Veaux displayed not a jot of saintliness beyond the

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commonplace pieties of the day. Within his family, his mother was the dominant influence, inculcating in him a sickly-sweet affection for religious bric-a-brac -- ivory-resin crucifixes, packets of holy pictures, vernacular editions of lives of the saints, popularized for the sticky tastes of the many. His father, the church organist, should have known enough to instill in his offspring a respect for scholarship, or an acquaintance with Latin and Greek; he did not. Even de Veaux' mentor, and the founder of the order Bernard was to join, was to concede that de Veaux' academic shortcomings kept him from elucidating the subtler lines of scriptural interpretation. Bernard de Veaux' was as bourgeois and empty education -- hardly the bedrock on which to claim sanctity.

+ Very early in his career it became evident that Bernard de Veaux, far from being some paragon of spiritual health, was what modern psychologists would call a *hypochondriac*, someone afflicted with the unreasonable conviction that a certain disease is his certain destiny. In de Veaux' case he was twice the fool because his imagined ailment was something he knew next to nothing about, leprosy. In letter after letter, and in diary entry after diary entry, we see our deluded missioner fretting that this time he is a goner for sure, that he has finally contracted leprosy and will begin exhibiting its symptoms any moment -- loss of feeling in his extremities, the discoloration of the flesh, the first signs of deformation, often at the ears. Yet he never actually exhibited these symptoms, and for two good reasons. One: he obviously was never a leper. And two: he hadn't done his homework. A charming idiosyncrasy in an otherwise courageous and pious priest? Perhaps -- but we know that his pathetic fears interfered with his ministry on Chotako. (Patrick MacConacht intended to make great use of his hypochondria theory. For one thing, he hoped to set a new, psychoanalytic standard for the

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ancient process of canonization. For another, he planned to deduce that Bernard de Veaux' medical obsession cast doubt as well upon his relationship with God. True, it was a backward species of logic:

Major premise: All fear feeds on doubt.

Minor premise: Bernard de Veaux experienced fear.

Conclusion: Bernard de Veaux lived in doubt.

But it was good enough for Rome.)

+ Then there was the matter of the company Bernard de Veaux kept during his stay on Chotako. MacConacht had it in mind to mention only in passing the day-to-day effect of the islanders' nudity upon a man of de Veaux' fiber. Why, it had an unholy effect upon a man as substantial as himself while completing his research there; one shuddered to consider its power over as quavery a figure as the "saint" in question. Think, thought MacConacht, think of the opportunities the man must have had to compromise his vows, if not in the over-available flesh, then in the seamier recesses of the mind.... He caught the reflection of himself in the plane window, licking his lips. But he would not stress this aspect, no; not when he had a more damning insinuation on hand. What, for instance, was one to make of Bernard de Veaux' relationship with the nihilist Charles Roubaix, who perished alongside -- some would even say in lieu of -- his hometown chum? Roubaix was plainly some kind of moral miscreant, a monster who deserted his wife and daughter in France to take up instead with his Melanesian houseboy Iluki, whose services later passed on to de Veaux. The Curia did not require a man to wink to see the possible connections in a case such as this. Suffice it that MacConacht grant Bernard de Veaux constancy with regard to female flesh; the good Italian priests and

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bishops knew all about the delectations of the French. There was even a ecclesiastical term for MacConacht's argument: *innuendum*.

+ As for Father de Veaux' "miracles," MacConacht was on terra very firma. These days in Rome the multiplication of loaves and fishes would elicit at best a shrug, and de Veaux' miracles were all yawners. The mass conversion following his "martyrdom," for instance. In most places, to be sure -- Italy, France, the United States -- mass conversion would indeed impress as an upper-class miracle; but upon examination of the society of Chotako, living as it did under the authoritarian rule of the High-Brow King Betel -- the forty-eighth of a long line of King Betels on the island -- MacConacht was not persuaded that the alleged mass conversion had occurred under the most democratic of auspices. He learned, as an instance, that those islanders unwilling to waive their old totemic beliefs in favor of the French missionary's were extended the opportunity to swim to religious freedom on the next island, forty shark-infested miles away. MacConacht doubted the legality of renewal at shark-point.

(Conversely, he giggled, if Father de Veaux were such a splendid curate that his islanders should convert *en masse* in the *post mortem*, what explained their near-absolute disinclination to do so while he was alive and in their midst? For at the height of his ministry no more than thirty arose Sunday mornings from their betel-juice hangovers to attend 10 o'clock Mass, and his baptism registry, after eleven years of preaching the new life to be got in Christ, numbered a decidedly unmiraculous eighteen, all but a few of them dying infants. And while our hero for the Church was in such a fever of exertion, the worship of native booboo's continued even among the handful of bona fide converts he did make, along with the worship of phallic totems, shark-spirits, the infliction of vicious tattoos,

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ritual incest, cohabitation more casual than occurs in the most artistic heights of Montparnasse, and even -- as Bernard's own "martyrdom" proved -- the continuation of cannibalism, their ancient taste for human flesh. Bravo, de Veaux!)

+ One holds out the hope, as good Christians must, that in the midst of such cruel depravity de Veaux might express his shock and outrage in his letters homeward, at the least. One holds it out, but to no avail, for his letters speak only of his admiration for the savages around him, wallowing in moral much as they were; of his fascination with the local flora and fauna (as if he were a mere naturalist, and not a conduit to the truer, super-nature!); and of his pathetic and continuing obsession with the ravages of a disease which did not even afflict him. What with his permissiveness, his paranoia, and his parochial half-wittedness, one is scarcely surprised at the statistics he took with him to his Maker.

+ Not least, but last, our good priest's "martyrdom":

Accounts differed, but there was this consensus, that King Betel XLVIII -- for reasons no one fully understood -- turned against the priest's presence on the island. Thereupon he had de Veaux brought to him in bonds, and challenged the priest to convert him, and the poor priest failed. The penalty for failure was death by torture.

And yet the story was still not as simple as that. In between his condemnation and the hour assigned for execution, de Veaux was released and given time to escape from Chotako. Now: MacConacht checked with the shipping schedules from the year 1872 and discovered that there was no possibility of de Veaux' rescue by the Dutch steamer anchored at Malaita. Which explains native accounts, in which Father de Veaux spent his last hours constructing for himself a small craft with which to escape his tormentors -- and

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exact model, it seems, of a Norman dinghy. (That he should have wasted his last days among his flock thus preoccupied suggests by itself the depth of Father Bernard's apostolic fervor.)

Still the natives cling to the martyrdom account, which holds that the priest did not paddle away from their island and his demise as fast as his dinghy could take him, but that he found courage and stayed to the last, administering the sacraments and preaching the love of God to the people of the beach, his Low-Brows. On the dawn of the full moon, when de Veaux was scheduled for recapture, he was taken by a band of inland zealots and was returned to the hills to be beaten and imprisoned. In the morning he was bound by the wrist and hair to a stretching post and treated to additional abuse. Not once, the accounts agree, did the priest open his lips to cry out; his only words were words of forgiveness, right until the end. Strung along the stretching frame, he was tortured in a most grisly fashion: by having the flesh of his neck and collar snipped bit by bit, removed from him, and swallowed before his own eyes.

Finally he was beheaded, his carcass cooked and devoured, his brain served to the king as a blood-pudding, and his face removed from his skull and made into some sort of islander ornament.

It was a great story, MacConacht agreed, and he admired the style in which the natives concocted their own version of a martyr's death -- it was right up the Vatican's alley. But, he suspected, the story was obviously an apocryphal one, and it bore the marks of a concoction the gore-minded people of Chotako were likely to cook up. Doubtless, in the story's elemental parts, it had existed for centuries; when de Veaux arrived he was simply incorporated into it, as Cortex was into the legend of the Plumed Serpent.

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But MacConacht's suspicions were more than that, for there was one thing missing in the Bernard de Veaux hagiography and it was an important element, too: Bernard de Veaux himself. Where was the body? Where was that emptied skull? And where the honored bones? And whatever became of the islander ornament?

The truth was, they were nowhere on Chotako, a place where one's earthy parcel and package were remains to be seen, not hidden away like the weapon in an Belgian murder mystery. Even Charles Roubaix had a decent burial plot on Chotako -- a nice French grave it was, too. But Bernard de Veaux was nowhere to be found, and Patrick MacConacht had more than a suspicion that it had disappeared days before King Betel held his cook-out, that it had gone bounding over the main and away from Chotako in a tiny Norman dinghy. Perhaps Bernard de Veaux was more among us than his followers suspected. Perhaps he was now an octogenarian Honolulu lounge lizard, the memories of martyrdom dissolved in bad gin.

MacConacht was a lawyerly sort of priest, and not many coincidences were lost upon him. *Habeas corpus* -- give us the carcass. On that old chestnut he would hang his case.

Patrick MacConacht smiled confidently, and the plane bounced. He opened his eyes again and peered out the window, as lightning lit the rippling, combed waters below. By the time the plane reached Djakarta it would be dawn, he thought. How little the modern world had become, that he should research in a matter of weeks what used to take Rome decades. His only wish was that he might deliver personally the evidence he had accumulated on Bernard de Veaux; speak to the committee on canonization himself, that he might have

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the pleasure of seeing this French pansy of a priest blown out of the water, dinghy and all.

For: the kindly priest of Chotako -- MacConacht would stake his immortal soul on this -- was no saint. He imagined himself buying the old lounge lizard a drink, and the old man holding out his shaky hands, and muttering something about how he, of all men since Adam, had been cured of leprosy.

Again the lightning flashed. Except that this time the world no longer seemed small to Patrick MacConacht, or so comfortable. For an instant he seemed to be exactly where he was, high over the Pacific Ocean, a thousand miles from land, any land, in an electrical storm, in the dead of night.

Even in this tiny world a man can get lost, he thought, and the plane bucked, and he shivered.

a holy brother
of the ocean of the lord.

Founding a religious order is like starting a restaurant: lots of people have a go at it but few in fact succeed. It is a universal privilege, nearly: anyone can announce that from (this moment forth), a new order, of equal stature with the orders of Benedict, Ignatius, and Francis, exists; and that it will be known as The Order of (Your Name Here). The Vatican will not ring you up later that day and say you can't do that. On the other hand, obtaining the Church's official blessing for your endeavors may take centuries.

That was how it was for Francois Champignon, diocesan priest of the district of Puy-de-Dome, who, never having traveled outside Clermont-Ferrand and its immediate environs in all his 41 club-

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footed years, but having entertained all his adult life the notion of a missionary order of brothers and priests spreading the Gospel as far as possible from the smokestacks and philistinism of that charmless provincial capital, in the year 1855 drew up a charter for his Brothers of the Ocean of God, or Les Freres du Mer de Dieu, a name which was subject to a most dreadful mispronunciation and which Francois promised to change the minute the order had made its first official Saint.

So saying, Father Champignon set to his task of making his Holy Brothers credible -- and accreditable -- to the Curia in Rome. His academy admitted young men from every class in the district, and both seminarians and collegians alike professed a fondness for the escapist headmaster with the noticeable limp.

In the first year of the academy's operation two students especially stood out. The first was the banker's son, Charles Roubaix, esteemed as much for his knack with philosophical twists and turns as for his adeptness at business and law; time and again Father Champignon would champion young Roubaix as the prototype of what Les Freres could do with young Frenchmen. The other boy was in most respects less remarkable -- Bernard de Veaux, the organist's son. Poor at scholastics and burdened with an embarrassing stammer -- perhaps it was humility which prevented him from pronouncing the consonant sounds that were his initials, *b*, *d*, and *v* -- he was nevertheless, by virtue of his likable calm and subtly piety a favorite of Champignon's.

On these two young men rose the older man's highest hopes: that Roubaix might by his brilliance bring acclaim for the order's teaching, and that de Veaux might lead its missions across God's oceans.

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Father Francois spent months individually with the two, imparting to Roubaix all that he knew about Aristotle, Descartes, Montesquieu, and the moderns, everything from that part of him which cherished inquiry and ideas; and to young de Veaux he imparted a love of maps and spinning globes, tales of adventure and faraway postmarks, exhortations to go and baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, and dire warnings of the sufferings men of God in cruel climes underwent gladly, with odd smiles to the death.

In the end Roubaix far surpassed his headmaster's knowledge and went on to Schulpforta to learn what the Lutherans knew. And while Francois had qualms about what sorts of things Lutherans knew, he nevertheless did not disapprove -- for it hadn't been Charles' soul he had been sculpting all along anyway, but his mind.

And as for young Bernard, the opposite was the case. Whatever went into the tender-hearted youth's right ear shortly exited out the left. He was like a sieve through which Latin, Greek, and the sciences passed, leaving only sticks and stones to remember. By day he learned and by night he forgot, and Champignon could only hope that his protege passed the examinations prior to ordination, after which his ignorance could do no one any harm. It was with a mixed sense of destiny and relief that the master was on hand for the disciple's ordination as priest in 1863. Bernard's long-awaited mission -- to attend to the lepers on the island of Chotako in the south Solomons -- was to begin that spring.

So moved was Bernard de Veaux by his joy at being ordained and assigned to toil in a far field that his speech peculiarity, a halting stutter, which he forbore but which strained the patience of

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all he addressed, deteriorated. Finally one day Champignon asked if there weren't some problem.

"No, Father," the young priest said, smiling fiercely. "It's only that I am so v- v- very happy to b- be going to work among the lepers. It is a d- d- d- a dream come true. A proof of the Lord's great b- b- b-"

"Bounty?" Francois provided the missing word and nodded.
"Surely you are inwardly moved by the terrors that await you there?"

"No, no, d- definitely not," Bernard de Veaux lied. And yet it was a holy lie, for all his life, ever since he was a boy of six or seven, and heard from the lips of the good sisters the stories of lepers who dwelt in the gospels' caves in order to spare the clean and whole the unhappiness of beholding their unclean and unwhole countenances, their shriveled extremities, their blotched and loosening noses and ears, the disease had had a fateful fascination for him, and a special terror too. The nuns had told him that the leper was the worldly manifestation of what sin was to the soul, a disfiguring human fungus of fathomless despair. Nightmares of putrefaction filled his youth, even as his schoolmates flew kits and rode stallions. Dripping flesh, the self divided, plus the moral agony of guilt -- for it was the European traders who introduced the affliction to the vulnerable islanders -- even now, as an adult, he still had to collect himself from time to time to thank God, to bless him, for choosing Bernard de Veaux, who in Clermont-Ferrand would have always been The Stuttering Priest, but who on the remote Solomon Island of Chotako would be evidence incarnate of the Mysterious Hand moving among men.

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While on shipboard, the nightmares of his childhood returned, more vivid and more horrible than ever. Even in broad daylight the wails of the slumbering priest pierced his cabin walls, and the more thoughtful of the ship's crew murmured about the holiness of a man thus tormented by God, that he should have instilled in him such abject fearfulness, and such an impossible destiny.

In mid-May the ship, having crossed around under the Cape of Good Hope and pressed upward through the Indian Ocean, finally put in at the island of Chotako, and immediately a squadron of native dugouts paddled out to give their new pastor welcome. Even then the pious Bernard remained on his knees in his quarters, and had to be brought to the side in the arms of two stout sailors.

the temptation of bernard de veaux, in five panels

Lowered past the riggings along the ship's bulkhead and taken into the arms of several large and naked colored people, Bernard de Veaux did not know what else to do, so he made the Sign of the Cross 100 times. He looked over his shoulder at the ship which, having business on Malaita, had barely time to signal him Godspeed with three huzzahs before lifting anchor to depart. The feeling gnawed at Bernard de Veaux that this time he had bitten off more than he could chew.

In the first place, his status as his order's very first missioner meant he had not had the benefit of any predecessors' experiences in the field. Consequently he was not completely clear on what precisely a missionary did, after having preached the daily gospel, which seemed at the moment, judging by the crowd lining up on the

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beach with spears and tomahawks, a bit premature. Fine people, doubtless, but strikingly un-French to Bernard's sense of things, and the truth was he had never actually met anyone before who was not French. He had met French Protestants upon occasion, and supposed the islanders would be somewhat like French Protestants. He scanned their faces for signs of laxity.

Secondly, beyond laxity was leprosy. In France he had never quite got up the courage to do any serious research on the subject, which was almost as well given Bernard's talent for research. Consequently, he came to hope it was a subject he could sort of pick up as he went along. Granted, it was ghastly -- as a schoolboy he knew that much. But specifically how and in what fashion was it ghastly? After dripping wounds -- which did not lend themselves to much of a mental image, rather like the gnashing of teeth in that respect -- what? Did one bind lepers up as one did with ski victims? Or did one merely sponge their horrible sores, as he had heard somewhere or other? He had heard on certain Catholic streetcorners back in Puy-de-Dome about great leper missionaries before him who did marvelously theatrical things such as embracing the diseased, licking their wounds, and so forth. On balance, he hoped his work on Chotako would not come to that. Anything else, though, the Lord God was welcome to.

Onshore a welcoming committee comprised of the beach-people's king, a board of councillors, a select band of virgins and warriors, plus a number of miscellaneous curious beach-people, gathered to greet their new shepherd. Without exception, de Veaux noted to himself as he climbed out of his dugout to meet them, they were naked as jaybirds. He shook his head pessimistically and introduced himself.

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"How do you d- d- do," he said, politely bowing before the man who seemed to be the king, who in turn stared at de Veaux phlegmatically. De Veaux returned the stare, for he was struck by the shape of the king's head. By everyone's head, now that he studied them closely -- they were all squashed-looking in back and straight up and high in front. The total effect was of a head the shape of the brown rubber tip on a mucilage dispenser. De Veaux felt giddy with his discovery; only a strange amount of effort prevented his laughing out loud at the king and his mucilage-bottle constituency.

"I'm d- dreadfully sorry," he said, composing himself, while a frowning councillor stepped forward and addressed him, and stamped his spear upon the beach as punctuation. Bernard shook his head and stifled a giggle.

"You see," he said, "I don't understand a b- b- bit of mumb- bo jumb- b- bo. Doesn't anyone here speak French?" He looked appealingly into a dozen sloped faces.

So, he thought, still light-headed. A language problem. And then it was too much for him, and he lapsed into laughing hysterics, shutting his eyes and holding his belly with both hands. And then he collapsed in an unconscious heap.

Now, the beach people had an ancient and a healthy respect for fever, and they were to a man impressed that this visitor to their nation should succumb to fever within a few scant minutes of landing -- it usually took newcomers hours, or days -- and they cheerfully bore him up in their naked arms and transported him to a special hut reserved for the beach people's most honored guests, and they laid him in it to have his visions and die. Their one regret was

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that the fun was so foreshortened -- life on the beach the past several years had been dull even by their standards.

The shamans of the beach people were right about the visions. Bernard de Veaux' delirium lasted for five days, each day a distinct phase in the breakdown of what he trusted and believed, each day more haunting and hallucinatory than the day before.

For the first three days the theme of the visions was leprosy. The first day he imagined he could feel the disease come over his body, could feel his skin cracking, the scabs forming then bursting, the juice of his body turning to pus, the vibrant limbs wilting into atrophy. In his dream he stood at his bureau to see how grave the damage was and was shocked to see himself still whole. Bernard de Veaux reeled, struggled to reconcile the sensations of dread reporting from all the stations of his body with the picture of health he beheld in the glass. Was he ill or was he well? Or was he both at once? He wept as he considered the dilemma before him: whether it was better to be a leper and show the horror plainly or to be a leper to oneself alone, as a lifelong secret. The former, he thought, for out in the world, where no one would believe his tale of woe, he was contagious still, and a danger; whereas in the caves and ledges where the lepers made their dwelling-places, amid the dark and shadows, he would still be an outcast -- among the world's refuse! Bernard de Veaux ground his teeth and wept for his fate, for himself, and uttered fevered prayers to God for understanding.

On the second day of his vision he felt God's grace come upon him: the symptoms finally emerged. His flesh ran from him, and that which was inside left him for the outside, and the people of the beach led him by long ropes from the hut where he lay out to the ledges to join his leprous flock. While saying his first Leper's Mass

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he hoisted the chalice to be consecrated only to drop it -- the disease had taken too harsh a toll of his hands -- and the blood of Christ burned through the altarcloth like splashed acid. Everywhere he walked through the village of damned souls the stench of decay put his heart to flight. Hearing the confession of a dying woman he sat patiently and heard her out even after she vomited upon his hands and chest, and live worms spiralled in the stew. It was with his own salt tears that he baptized a newborn leprous baby girl, her tiny twiglike limbs already softening to glue, and angrily he knelt by the font to shake his first at the gothic air above and curse the man who put seed in the mother, and dare the Almighty to show His face, his unblemished godly face, and explain in words the wonder of his works.

On the third day the local shaman appeared in the hut and crouched by de Veaux, naked, and with a shark's tooth sealed up inside his stretched foreskin. Bernard held out his hand to the man, and grasped his waistband of human knuckle-bones and dogs' feet before lapsing into sleep again. He awoke hours later when the shaman began to slap him about the face, and he choked on the smoky air in the tent. De Veaux imagined the shaman was an angel come to comfort him, to lead him gently to the other side of fever. But the angel continued slapping and badgering the delirious priest, until Bernard begged him, in the name of Jesus, to leave him alone, and the shaman withered at the mention of Jesus' name. Then Bernard knew that the little man was only the Devil come to taunt him in his unhappiness and to disrupt his mission before it began, to tempt him with some terrible sin. Bernard de Veaux reached over to grab the shaman by the wrists, but his hands went through the demon like smoke.

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On the fourth day no amount of slapping could awaken Bernard de Veaux. He had sunk deeper than dreams, he had slipped into a place where there was no longer fantasy or imagery. He lay on his mat of quills and coconut braid, sweating from the heat, then shivering violently, from fear as well as cold. In this most dangerous of his dreams, Bernard de Veaux stood as if at a distance from an immense blackness, a darkened universe, and even in his dreams he knew that the blackness was his death, and through it he could not make out a single speck of light, no glimmer of aught but the black of non-being, and he sagged in the spine at the sight of the dark and a great grief, a great nausea and a profound reluctance, overtook him. No light beyond life; no hand took his. Yet he found strength somehow in his sorrow to rise up again and inch toward the darkness on weary hands and knees. And though he heard no prompting, no voice, no word from beyond this life whispering to him, *Come*, or *Choose*, or *Believe*, he nevertheless pulled himself with the last strength he had in his frame to the opening that was his death, and, sucking in his life's last breath, he entered.

All that fourth day and into the fourth night he fell through the darkness like a stone, seeing nothing and feeling nothing, not even his own hands in the dark. Finally on the morning of the fifth day he imagined he heard a cry, a familiar voice from the familiar world, and concentrating with all his heart and mind he heard it again, coming closer.

"Bernard," the voice called to him, the voice of his mother, 10,000 miles away on the porch of his home in the village of Alois in the province of Puy-de-Dome, calling him in from play.
"Bernard!"

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The fever had broken. He opened his eyes, and struggled in the blear of his unfocused vision to raise himself up on one elbow to see where he lay: the same straw and clay hut in which Satan had had his way with him. All around him were diagrams drawn in the dirt, and from a pit in the middle of the hut he saw smoke curling upward into the thatch. Through the smoke he could make out the naked figure and sloped face of another in the hut, hunkering down along the mud wall, his body tattooed except for his poorly-completed face, and an obsidian-headed spear across his knees.

"Comment allez-vous, mon pere?" the savage asked in impeccable French, and in the accent of Bernard's home town.

the new man,

and the leper's spots

Bernard de Veaux hit himself above his right ear. Could he be hearing correctly? Could he have awakened from a five-day nightmare on the island of Chotako in the South Seas, to hear his native French dialect spoken by a young Melanesian with a bad complexion?

Bad complexion. Father Bernard shuddered as he remembered his mission, to minister to those poor devils afflicted with leprosy. And this inexplicably French-speaking savage was obviously a victim in an early stage of the disease, exhibiting small circular hollow spots on the forehead and cheek.

Frankly, it didn't look all that bad to Bernard. He pointed vaguely at the savage's face and laughed gently. Perhaps leprosy wasn't as terrible as the Bible made it out to be -- after all, this fellow had no dripping sores or open pustules, no desiccated fingers or toes, no atrophy of the limbs or face. He wished now he had read

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up more on the dread disease while he was back in France. Father Francois had had lots of books on the subject, but Bernard was afraid they would be full of scary pictures, and avoided them. Now he could just kick himself for his timidity. Leprosy had suddenly lost half its horror.

He smiled his friendliest, most pastoral smile. "I b- believe I am feeling much b- b- better now, thank you very much." He said it slowly and deliberately, so that the savage would understand. "And yourself -- how have you been faring?"

The savage smiled charmingly. "Bien, monsieur, but you are the sick one, not myself."

De Veaux did his best pastoral double-take, pointing at himself and arching his brows. Ah, he decided: the island's lepers pitied *him* for having had the fever. Such graciousness, and from such an unexpected source! "Where are the sick, then," he asked, "that I may thank them for their prayers?"

The savage squinted. "No one here's sick," he insisted, touching spear-point to dirt. "We are a remarkably healthy lot, all things considered."

"Now, you listen to me, young man. I d- don't know who you are --"

"My name is Ilukina-Maouki-koro, mon pere. Or call me simply Iluki."

" -- or what your name is, or why you speak the way you do -- "

"But, monsieur -- "

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" -- and I scarcely enjoy being made sport of on my v- very first d- day in your d- do- domain. Therefore I must insist that you explain: how? why? where did you learn to speak French so perfectly? And where are the lepers I was sent to tend to? And how can you tell me I'm the only sick man in the v- vici- vicin-- "

"Vicinity, mon pere?" The young savage dug his heels underneath himself. "I beg you not to tax yourself further, you are still shaky. Five days you lay here with *delirium tremens*, and now you must rest. I am delighted you did not die as all the others have before you, but I regret to tell you we have no lepers on Chotako."

"No lepers? None?"

"On my honor," Iluki shook his head. "I swear to you."

"B- but, your face -- aren't those the marks of the di- di-disease?"

The savage laughed amusedly, touching his fingertips to his forehead.

"La varicelle, mon pere. The chicken's pock. And if I did not speak the same language as you, I should not have been so afflicted. I contracted the disease, you see, from the man who taught me la francaise. The Roobinoo."

"Oh," the priest nodded, as if that explained everything. "The Roobinoo."

"Now sit up, my friend," Iluki told his guest. "I have toasted some crepes for you, and there is still some chokecherry jam in the larder."

"Eh?" Father de Veaux looked around in confusion.

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"There," the savage said. "Inside the coconut."

That night the beach people honored their new pastor, regarding his recuperation as a sign of great favor from the gods. The virgin girls danced for him and he nodded politely as each displayed her charms spread-eagled for him, naked except for waist-strings with knots of conch. The village elders took an instant liking to him, egging him on to choose from among the nut-colored girls. But the flustered priest could only bless each one and offer his hand, a custom which charmed the elders to toothless betel-drool grinning. A pig was roasted, halved, on glowing rocks.

And when it was time for Father de Veaux to return the honors bestowed on him, he stood, shook the sand from his cloak, and sang a song he had composed himself for that occasion. He sang it unaccompanied, but after a tune which his father had scored for the church organ in the tiny village of Alois. It is a song which even today is reprinted on the back leaves of St. Bernard de Veaux novena cards:

"Thank you, Lord (For Sparing Me the Cup)."

Of the people of the beach only Iluki understood the words of the song, and even he missed its theological implications. Even so, the beach rang with the handclaps and laughter of the Low-Browed islanders, who were well-impressed with Father de Veaux, only the second Frenchman they had ever seen.

The two figures followed a worn path through the thickest foliage de Veaux had ever stumbled through, especially bothersome to him because of his great height -- at 5 foot 9 inches he towered over Iluki and the other Low-Brows. Just overhead now, the cockatoos made their gasping cries, and hundreds upon hundreds of

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tiny wagtail flycatchers, glossy black and white-bellied, crisscrossed from branch to branch.

While Father de Veaux hobbled along behind his guide, Iluki filled him in on the island's geography, describing its dimensions, seasons, and way of life.

"Down there," he said, "there is a beach route which would likewise take us to the Roobinoo's, but this overland route saves half a day's walk. One thing though -- we must steer clear of the Betel-men."

"The which?" De Veaux was as perplexed by the tumult of new information as he was discomfited by the insects and heat.

"The Betel-men, the High-Brows. The hill people. The sons of the monster, King Betel. They are dreary, dreadful people, mon pere, uncouth and uncivilized, and frightfully ugly. When a child is born to the High-Browed people, they squeeze its head between shaved logs to elongate it, so that the head slopes forward from the eyes."

Bernard de Veaux frowned, and pointed toward Iluki's own glue-bottle head, which sloped the other way, backward from the eyes.
"B- but your own -- oh, never mind."

Iluki patted his flat forehead. "Now this is the way to shape a head," he said. "Tres chic, n'est-ce pas, mon pere?"

Bernard de Veaux shrugged and nodded, and stumbled on.

"But these High-Browed people," Iluki continued, "they are barbaric in the extreme. They eat their own children, they eat each other, they will even eat you if they are in the mood. And they always keep the heads of their dead, high on posts outside their huts

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or mounted on little canoes inside. The one as a warning, the other as a relic. Unspeakable, really. We Low-Brows never do such things, hardly."

"Can you tell me, Iluki, why there are so few ad- ad- adul-grownups among your people? Everyone seems to either be extremely old or still a child."

Iluki scratched his head. "How old do I look?"

"Oh, twenty -- twenty-two at most."

"Monsieur the Priest, I am but thirteen years of age." Iluki shook his head fatalistically. "Our demographics are not so good here -- too much coconut in the diet, I suspect."

A king parrot, with blushing-rose beak, dropped down between the two and sprayed the priest with white glue, and danced off again, squawking. Father de Veaux looked at the splotch on his sleeveless cassock with an expression of sorrow, and scraped at it with a large flat leaf.

"This reminds me," he said, "I notice you and your people are quite -- nude."

Iluki pursed his lips regretfully. "It's true," he said. "We *are* nude."

"Any -- particular reason?"

"We have no clothes," Iluki shrugged.

"Oh, that is too b- b- -- that is a shame." Bernard stumbled over a huge root and scared into the brush a blue spider the size of a small cabbage.

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"Well," Iluki said, "the Roobinoo, he tried to dress us up. He ordered several hundred -- what do you call these?" He held his palms in front of himself, pantomiming bouncing breasts.

"B- b- bra- brassieres?"

"Precisely. But, would you believe, they rotted right off us, in a matter of mere weeks. But it was as well because only the men would wear them anyway, which wasn't what the Roobinoo had in mind in the first place."

Just then three children, boys, bounded past them on the path, shaking bamboo spears at the two travelers and laughing. Bernard was put to fright by their spectral white hair, and asked Iluki to explain.

"Powder of lime," Iluki told him. "Kills the cooties."

Bernard slapped his cheek, and stared at the bloody mosquito that lay smeared across his palm.

"Not malarial," Iluki assured him. "The anopheles is smaller than that big bruiser. Besides he bores into you from a headstand, Here," he reached over Bernard's head and took a smaller mosquito between his fingers and held it out. "See the difference?"

Bernard nodded, and swallowed hard. "Let's keep walking, shall we?"

"But mon pere, malaria is not so bad. Compared to many things, we say that the man who falls to the mosquito has survived many things already. There," he pointed to a scaly centipede poking under a leaf. "He could send you to your God this afternoon." Iluki laughed and crushed the centipede's head with his naked heel.

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As they crossed the final hillock between them and the Roobinoo's camp, Bernard paused to read his daily office. Closing his book, he made Iluki an offer.

"You wouldn't want to b- b- become a Catholic, would you?"

Iluki arched his brows thoughtfully. "Leave me some literature," he said, "and I will give it some thought."

Bernard was very pleased. Missionary work was really quite simple, he told himself. And when they came down the hill and saw the tidy suburban cottage under a bank of shimmering poplar trees, he was even more delighted. He marveled at the French water mill, the hedgerowed garden, and the ornamental lamppost out front to greet them. All the cottage lacked was glass windows.

And there in the doorway stood the Roobinoo, gesturing to them.

"Why, Bernard," he said, and stepped out of the frame to take his hand. "How the devil are you?"

"Wonderfully well," Bernard de Veaux said, holding out his hand to his old classmate back in Puy-de-Dome, Charles Roubaix, the broker's son. "And yourself?"

Inside, Charles Roubaix poured the tired priest a snifter of brandy and the two sat over sesame crackers, Roubaix insisting Bernard sample his latest acquisition, a tin of Alsatian blackberry jam.

"I must congratulate you on your appointments here," de Veaux told his host. "It is ev- ev- ever so much more pleasant than my own quarters with the people of the beach."

"Well," Roubaix said, staring at the brandy legs in his glass, "if you rely on local design you get what you deserve. All my treasures

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here are imported. I have an arrangement with a certain Dutch ship's captain out of Malaita. I supply him with what he needs, and he brings me pretty things." The Roobinoo plucked a begonia from the vase on the table and sniffed its fragrance. "I like pretty things," he said.

"God has been good to you, then," Bernard said.

Roubaix arched a penciled brow. "*I have been good to me,*" he said as correction. "You may find you left your God back on the pier in France."

Bernard looked at his hands as he asked, "Charles, why are you here?"

"Not that you will understand, but I am here because beauty calls me to this kind of world. You live for an idea so worn-out it creaks even as you express it. My idea is as new and warm and gives nourishment like a young mother's breast."

Bernard de Veaux blushed. Breasts had always embarrassed him -- naming them perhaps even more than seeing them.

"But, tell me, Charles -- what of your career with your father's bank? And your wife, what of her? I had heard you had a daughter, and another on the way."

"Figments of irrelevance, my priest, and wisps of nothing-at-all! My father, and my poor innocent, meat-eating wife and her babes -- and you! -- altogether you haven't the imagination to behold the world around you and to see that *you* create it, not some grandfather alarm clock in the clouds! Doubtless you truly believe you are sitting at brandy with me, wearing your ridiculous sheep-dog's face. But if I wish it, I can whisk you away, make you disappear entirely!"

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How?" Charles Roubaix tapped the center of his forehead.
"Imagination, priest."

Bernard remembered Charles' schoolyard cruelties, and took hold of a table-leg, just in case. Roubaix, catching the gesture, laughed an over-loud, madman's laugh.

"Relax, Christ-slave. I won't whisk you away. I use other magic nowadays to achieve my ends."

"What magic d- do you mean, Charles?"

Roubaix scowled. "My art, of course. Surely you have seen my work in Paris?"

"I -- have never b- been. Apologies."

A grimace of bitterness from Roubaix. "I should have know. I'll bet not even that old fool Champignon knows of my art. The Church has ever been the enemy of beauty."

Bernard wanted to soothe his host. "Perhaps you can show me some of your work, Charles?"

Roubaix rose from the table. "Naturally. We will visit my studio, come." He led Bernard up a cast-iron caracole leading to the cottage's loft, plus an extra room, in which perhaps a hundred canvasses hung, or leaned one against another. Bernard instantly noticed an oil portraying an indignant Christ, with a billy-club in hand, driving -- they wore Belgian bowlers -- a team of money-lenders from the steps of the cathedral at Rouens. One of the brokers, sporting a glittering watch-chain, was a ringer for Roubaix' father. The painting was a fair updating of Raphael, and Bernard hastened to express approval.

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"You would like it," Roubaix sneered. "Imagining some vestigial piety on my part, doubtless. But you are mistaken -- I hate it. Here, I'll show you."

And taking the painting down from its hook he cracked the stretcher over one knee. The indignant Christ collapsed in a heap.

"A transitional work," Roubaix asserted, "and the transition is complete! Now if you sincerely wish a peek at the future of art for the next one hundred years, behold!" And he gestured grandly at his latest effort, still mounted on its easel.

Bernard pressed a finger to his chin as he examined it. It was a picture of a native girl in a white French brassiere, resting at the base of a giant coconut palm, an earthen jug beside her, and a spectacular and grossly-lit sunset behind, burning her face an exotic vermillion color. It reminded Bernard of a kind of painting seen in the parlors of the middle-class back in Puy-de-Dome, favored for its brightness and for the pagan accoutrements. The girl's complexion might change, and the coconut tree become a Doric column, but the garish sunset was the same. Bernard bit his lip and praised the work for its celebration of light.

"One thing, however," he said. "The brassiere. D- don't you think it perhaps -- d- detracts?"

Roubaix stiffened. "I am a servant in the house of truth," he said. "I could not make the woman's breasts beautiful enough so I covered them up. You have seen the island women, have you not?"

"Well..."

"The ugliest breasts in the entire world. It's different on Tahiti. The women on Tahiti have beautiful breasts."

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Father de Veaux smiled thinly. Roubaix downed the last drop of brandy, daubing his lips with his napkin. Stepping toward the paneless window, he caught sight of Iluki below, flipping through Bernard's office.

"I see you have picked up one of my castaways."

"B- beg pardon?"

"Iluki," Roubaix said with a faint simper. "He used to be my -- my houseboy."

"He speaks well of you, and of the things you taught him."

"Does he, indeed. I would still have him if it weren't for his --" Roubaix waved a hand at his own face "-- imperfections."

Suddenly Roubaix whirled and dashed his snifter against the stone wall. "Enough chit-chat," he said. "I think we have arrived at an understanding, no?"

Bernard was puzzled. "What? How?"

Roubaix shrugged. "You came to aid our lepers. We have none. You came to tell the islanders of Paradise. They are already there. You came to claim this island for your God. But as you can see, there is a prior claim, my own. Here, I am God. *Ergo*, which I have to remind you is Latin for *therefore*, I suggest your next move is to depart from here, on the first ship to drop anchor."

Bernard blinked. Charles had thought this all out beforehand. "And -- if I stay?"

Roubaix gave him a fierce scowl. "No more blackberry jam," he hissed. "Bernard, I can afford no more gestures with you. What can you hope to accomplish by staying here?"

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"Perhaps," Bernard stammered softly, "I can lend a counterbalancing influence."

thoughts from the head-house

In time the boy Iluki became not only Bernard de Veaux' houseboy but also his translator, teacher, acolyte, and convert. Together the two erected, a stone's throw from the crashing surf, a chapel which was as near a French Catholic church as Bernard, with island materials, could approximate. Even Iluki sensed that, with its slanting thatch roof and purposeless doorways and floor of mud, it was an amateurish affair; but Bernard was blind to its faults, and spoke grandly to his helper to the effect that it had been God and not themselves who had fashioned this beachhead cathedral. To Iluki the cathedral seemed more like the Roobinoo's picnic shelter, but he merely shrugged and admired the priest's certitude.

"Did you know," Iluki asked on the occasion of his baptism in the font de Veaux had made of a discarded ship's cistern, "that now that you have my one soul you have destroyed my other?"

"I what?"

"It's true, bon pere. For before I had two souls, one for the spirit-land and the other to remain among you when I have gone, to linger here in my headhouse. My question to you, therefore, is which one do I still have?"

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Father Bernard pondered, then spoke. "The former, I should think. In any ev- event, your skull won't be kept in a headhouse, will it? It isn't the Christian way, you know."

"But, mon pere -- without a head there can be no head-feast. No roesti pig, no honeyed yams, no happy send-off. I don't know, mon pere, but sometimes I miss the old-time religion."

"Well, you can just forget it, because this is one parish that d-does not tolerate b- b- backsliding. And you can put that in your headhouse and smoke it!"

April 13, 1867

My dearest brother, Francois!

This is my latest installment concerning our mission here on the island of Chotako. It is now a full two years since my arrival here, and despite some physical complaints, with which I will deal later, I am happy to report that our mission has met with some success here.

It is most singular, I suppose, that after all this time I am still the visitor here, the butt of some unending and picaresque comedy of errors. Only the teller of this joke, my brother, is The Almighty, and it is all I can do to join in, belatedly, with the general laughter. There are times when I do mope about and feel sorry for myself, "stranded" as I am, and missing my first home and my countrymen. But these feelings are very like the cloudy tide that comes in off the reef after a good rain -- soon it passes away. Meanwhile my true, my one home is the grace of God; and my true countrymen are his creatures everywhere.

For example, let me tell you about the megapodes. Birds by designation, but unlike any birds you can imagine. They are like the

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argus pheasant in that they mate with terrible pomp and pretention, but it is in their egg-laying that they defy all comparison. A single hen may dig a hole fifteen feet across, and deposit her eggs amid soil, leaves, and a mound of packed twigs -- and promptly lose all sense of concern!

I have seen a native to my right digging for an egg while a megapode on my left was burying one, perfectly oblivious. The Low-Brows see the megapode not as a foolish or stupid bird but rather as a possessor of the venerable secret of getting by -- to kill a megapode is a capital crime; even a dog harassing a bird is torn to bits by the protective people of the beach.

And, if that isn't the blessedest thing, consider this: I myself betook to cadge an egg the other day, and when I had got it home, it hatched on me, and the little bird inside was already fully feathered, and it sang, and lo, it leaped into the air and flew out my window!

The island abounds with such oddments of nature, and I am left alternately perplexed and delighted by them. Not so our old friend Roubaix. There have been times when I felt I might end the strange enmity between us were I to memorize a favorable review from *L'odeon Artiste* and work it into conversation. Yes, it means giving in to his egoism, but what of that -- would it have been so wrong for the early Christians to praise Nero's musicianship?

I am certain Charles is simply mad, for want of a friendly pat on the head, yet I cannot persuade him he is not the Antichrist he fancies himself to be. In recent weeks he has organized his fledgling coconut industry and shipped his first batch to Malaita and then on to wherever it is that the big coconut money is made these days. A dozen of the Low-Brows, facing eviction from his beach village, have signed on as indentured field-hands for the wage of

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one iron frying pan per year. And while they labor he paints their portraits, his Snyder musket upright against his easel.

Coconut, my friend! The one thing on Chotako which passes for literature is the Coppera Legend, passed from father to son for centuries, all the way back to the first High-Brow monarch, Betel the First. Of all the gods and devil-devils there is none greater than the Coconut God, because he is the most usable one of them all. And this ancient legend tells all its uses, from the story of how Coppera came to Chotako "many fellah moon" ago, and how the first man, himself named Chotako, cracked it open, and inside was a blue cockatoo which could speak, and the blue cockatoo lists all its uses, from No. 1 all the way to use No. 846, which on Chotako is a round number, like our 1,000 -- the local mathematics is strictly a practical one!

At any rate, I find it mildly apocalyptic that at this late date in Chotako's history our Roobinoo should introduce use No. 847, coconut as a means to raise funds. It has already done great damage to local arithmetic, and it bodes as ill for the lot of the Low-Brow working-man.

I have had another audience with the inland chief, Betel XLVIII, at the king's stern insistence. He is troubled, up on his mountain throne, by some ancient prophecy about a god coming from across the Great Sea, and can't decide which of us two Frenchmen is the fulfillment of the prophecy, Charles or myself. I suspect he wishes to give us the benefit of the doubt, for he refers to Charles as "big fellah belong white mastah," which is the rough equivalent of *governor*, whereas he calls me "big fellah belong white mastah belong *him*," meaning I am Charles' father -- a misconception based on my priesthood, I think. And the foolishness does not end there --

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the entire island is convinced that Charles and I are blood-relations, from the world's only white-skinned family, that Charles is my wayward son, and that my mission here is to take Charles by the ear and lead him back across the Great Sea!

As the days gather, I find myself subtly investing in that theory. And I even wonder if Charles may believe it as well.

You see, there is so much I am not saying that I wish to say. When I first put in at Chotako I wanted to -- now that I think about it, I'm not clear exactly what I wanted. To tame the wilderness? To convert the heathen heart? Something along those lines, I suppose. *I would give them God, the one, true One.* But God is a funny item to give, is he not? And perhaps not a thing I am or ever will be qualified to hand over, gift-wrapped.

You will remember my earlier letters expressing dismay at the child-selling, the child-molesting, the child-*eating*, the thousand cruelties, the trillions of irritants -- insects and reptiles, disease, the scent and taste in everything of blood. This jungle, my home, seemed the very capital of dying and death, everything devouring everything else, and the cannibals taking their lessons in life not from the missionary priest but from the mosquito, the lizard, the scorpion and shark. And I prayed in those days that the Lord God would lesson my terror, and he answered my prayers -- slowly!

Without wishing to sound like Francis, and without wishing to claim any great thing for my self, I am nevertheless proud to think I have got used to this place. Still I am bitten by things, every minute of every day, but I have given up my constant slapping. The fly, I now see, requires his fair share as well. And if the jungle is the capital of death it is also the engine of continual creation, or life.

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You would not believe, dear brother, the beauty, the music, that dance that never ends.

Here my own faith comes newly alive. Here people understand a god that dies and lives again. A god that gives his body as food. A god that gives his only son up to the test. In a nation of endless flowering it is Easter forever.

I am romanticizing again. I am no better than our friend Charles in that department, I fear, and his notion of the pagan's nobility. And God love and keep Charles Roubaix for his own, but he is still such a danger to this place. Perhaps the prophecy is indeed coming true, and it is indeed my mission to take him home by the ear, and let Paradise be Paradise!

As I mentioned, I still am given to weird pains in my face and my hands, a frightful soreness which comes and goes. It probably is arthritis, as you suggest, aggravated by the jungle air, but you know I still dream of being God's leper -- that fear remains unconquered.

My man Iluki and I have completed work on a mission booklet of *beche-de-mer* including a Lord's Prayer which sounds to a Frenchman's ear like a receipt from a fish-house. Be assured we will forward the full text with the next ship.

Your affectionate servant in Christ Jesus,
Bernard

It was Iluki who instructed Bernard in the rudiments of the Low-Brow language, and Bernard -- especially considering his ineptness with the classic languages of Europe -- took to the simpler, more melodious tongue with something like ease. In his eight years on Chotako he was never an actual master of the tongue, for there were

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no cognates in it, nor many syntactical parallels, but he was able to communicate to prospective parishioners through a stop-gap language he and Iluki put together, a *beche-de-mer*, using approximate French equivalents together with Father Bernard's own unique touch, his stutter.

"My goodness," he thought he was saying to native woman and her newborn child, "what a b- b- beautiful b- baby. And how many years has he?"

And the woman would blush, and smile. For Bernard could not have known the precise translation of what he had said:

"This boy-fellah belongs in the sunset with the sun, he comes sailing from your thighs of almond-meat like a jelly-fish godling. And how can a boy so made of gold ever die?"

As time passed, Bernard came to the conclusion that his mission was properly a fairly passive one. His sermons were composed of a higher proportion of compliments and blessings than fire and brimstone, and he spent the better part of his typical day staying out of people's way and being as little a pest as he could. He grew genuinely to love and admire the people of the beach, he liked their simplicity and easy-going civility, and inclined, over time, to overlook their sloped heads and nudity. Over time, too, the Low-Brows grew to accept and finally embrace the gentle priest with soft palms. At the very least he insulated them from the Roobinoo, who only came by anymore when he needed workers for his latest scheme.

Still, the Low-Brows had their limits. They did not appreciate Father Bernard's overturning their boobos -- their idol-drums -- and their totems. They could not understand his insistence on wearing

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his floor-length cassock, year in and year out; simply removing the sleeves was too small a step for them, though it was in the right direction. Finally, they found his crucifix positively revolting, and were forever after him to keep it out of sight of the impressionable children of the beach.

Father Bernard was happy to comply. He had no desire to force himself or his continent or his century upon his flock. Time would tell, he told himself often, time and the lesson of Christ. Therefore he decided not to call himself "missionary" again, not even in his letters home, and not to his nemesis on the other side of the island, Charles the Roobinoo Roubaix. For what exactly did Christianity propose to save these people from, save Christianitylessness? De Veaux did not seek to soft-pedal his God; more that he sensed that any offering he made his people had to be especially pure, especially proper, issuing not from the loins of Europe but rather from the universal human heart.

What he was, finally, was a priest, a common parish priest. He was not far-flung from civilization, he was not among savages or even strangers. He was among his own kind -- village businessmen, professionals and working men, schoolchildren and housewives -- and he was their friend.

"Hello," he would say to an elderly man who was tattooed all over, his skin everywhere embedded with spines and shell. "How are you today. I am v- very pleased to see you!"

And this new protocol met with success. Iluki explained handshakes to the people, and hand-kissing, and hat-tipping, and bowing at the waist, and bifocals and snuff and after-dinner peppermints, and the Low-Brows took the priest in and laughed. His delicate manners and sweet disposition won them wholly over,

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and it was a tribute to him that they came even to imitating his halting speech. Everywhere on the island of Chotako, well-bred ladies and discriminating gentlemen took to stuttering in their discourse.

Iluki never quite explained to the priest the imprecision of the *beche-de-mer*. Perhaps this was why (though Father Bernard never suspected it), when the excited priest held out his hand to a man or tipped his straw hat to a woman and told her, "You are as beautiful as the love the sun bears for the sparkling sea, as I will love you with all my heart forever," it was difficult not to reciprocate.

January 11, 1870

My dear Professor Champignon,

Greetings to you once again from a Paradise that knows no sin! I write with more news from our Garden, for I know it must be useful for you to hear *all* sides of an argument -- a rhetorical felicity you taught me years ago, which I cherish still!

Remember however that I write not to the priest in you -- for I have my own philosophies about these things -- but to that perceptive teacher for whom I bear naught but a proper, *intellectual* veneration, and the heartiest *human* affection. For my news concerns our dear brother de Veaux. I fear mightily for him, Francois. How I hope that a word from his beloved mentor might set him aright!

You will recall from our last correspondence that I was undecided as to why poor Bernard opposed my enterprises here on Chotako: was it because he was an old-style Communard and disposed by nature to foment mistrust among the masses? or was he perhaps a modern-day Communist, opposing all endeavor on the

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part of persons of genius and initiative -- myself immodestly included? I had hoped you might intervene, and urge our friend here to desist in his efforts against me.

A thousand shames upon you, Francois! Not only did you fail me in this matter, but you did not even bother to thank me for contributing to the academy, to be hung in a conspicuous place, my very favorite painting, "Christ Driving the Money-Lenders from the Temple." And I had thought you of all people would enjoy it, as it does embody the thrust of my work, which these days is increasingly *moral* and treats upon the good and evil impulses which are *innate* to human beings. I need only add that it was the one work which Bernard liked upon his first visit to my studio here -- not that the old knuckle-head is as discerning about matters aesthetic as you or I!

At any rate, six and a half years of discord have transpired between your former pupils. I honestly don't know why he opposes me, Francois. I do what I can to help the islanders, a few francs here and there, to alleviate their poverty, and I would help them all the more if only Bernard would mind *his* business and let get on with the business of minding *mine*. I have tried to make him see my side, how I am operating Roobinoo Export, Ltd., as much for the good islanders' benefit as for my own, but you know how pigheaded and unreasonable he can be. How I ache to assist my coloured brothers here! And how I wish Bernard would step aside and give me the chance to do just that!

Forgive me, I had not meant to sound *critical*. To the contrary, my intent was to inform you of certain rather grave concerns I have had lately as to our friend's increasingly shaky grasp of reality. Every month I pass his way on tour of my properties here,

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inspecting our new barbed-wire strand -- a service I provide to those tenants who feel the need to protect their tree-shares; it's perfectly safe, I assure you, and the share-croppers and delighted with it -- and this time I could scarcely believe Bernard's condition.

For there he was, his sleeveless soutane ragged and soiled, his feet bare, his hair snaggled, his face unshorn, and he was staggering down the beach in a daze, worse than the old men with their betel-stupors! And he was muttering to himself, and in Latin! It was a sorry spectacle, Francoise. I am glad you were not there to witness it for yourself.

Sometimes I think this: wouldn't it be good if poor Bernard here, instead of agitating the witless natives to insubordination against me -- who seeks only their good -- if poor Bernard would stick to his blessed Gospels! How the people, in their godlessness and degraded practices, would benefit from a high-type religion such as yours, an *organized* faith! Yet he wastes himself on his tantrums against me, and his delusions that he has been marked for leprosy! Ah me. I do what I can, but I am only one man, and Bernard is convinced that I am "out to get him." Laughable, lamentable mistake!

But perhaps a gentle word from you, Francois, to attend to matters more of the spirit and less to affairs of this world. I hesitate to suggest it, but perhaps his condition requires his recall to France. But there you have it -- the *right* thing is often the hardest thing to do.

Whatever you may decide, be assured that I remain your faithful student in all things and your ally in this corner of the world.

With utmost affection,

Charles Roubaix

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Francois Champignon set the letter from Roubaix on his roll-top desk and sipped from his tumbler of red wine. The World continues to amuse, he thought, and smiled.

He regarded his correspondence, all piled in a heap -- bills from the bookseller, from the cabinet-maker, the green-grocer, from the printer who produced the Holy Brothers' literature, long letters of introduction from dim-witted aspirants who, having failed to catch on with the Jesuits, Franciscans, and Benedictines, now turned to the last choice on their lists, Les Freres du Mer de Dieu. It is a crazy world, he thought; crazy here in France, and crazy, very crazy in Rome, and only God knew how crazy it got out beyond his great oceans.

At the risk of sounding Manichaen, he was strangely proud of both his students -- naturally he was proud of the pious and resolute Bernard, but he was inexplicably proud of that irascible rogue Roubaix. For after the mischief and after the misdoings, they were both his pupils, they were both his sons. And who knows? he thought. Perhaps some day the good that was in Bernard's heart would bring light even to the dark dungeon that was Roubaix'. Now, that would be a miracle.

The opposite, of course, was more unthinkable than even a miracle. No, Charles Roubaix would never be poor Bernard de Veaux' savior.

the devil's advocate,
and a mystery guest

The Promoter of the Faith -- the man who was assigned the role of Devil's Advocate in the case of the South Seas missionary Bernard de Veaux -- turned out to Patrick MacConacht's surprise and delight

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to be a gentleman of considerable prosecutorial vigor. Atanosio Peruzzi, a full bishop attached to the Vatican Library's research division, was not one of those grandfatherly types the Curia was always trotting out to ask the opposition to speak louder. Atanosio was sharp, urbane, a Southerner who comported himself like a Northerner, persuasive to a fault and yet likable humorous in his delivery. It was a splendid combination to find on one man, and except for humor -- which MacConacht seldom found amusing, even when it served his purposes -- the superior enjoyed his assistant's enthusiastic support.

Consider Bishop Peruzzi's concluding remarks to the assembled elders. MacConacht marveled especially at the genteel Italian's skill at using the language of orthodoxy to undermine its own sophistry:

"Beloved shepherds," he began, and smiled at them as if they were more like fellow poker-players, "it is our bounden duty to give this man, Bernard de Veaux, his due. From the very best evidence our committee has been able to assemble, utilizing the most modern of research methodologies and the unstinting efforts of my assistant beside me, Father MacConacht of the United States of America" -- here MacConacht swiveled and smiled his best Roman smile, fake-pastoral -- "we have determined that Father de Veaux was a fine priest, a man of decency and of honor; a man we as Catholics can be pleased to call 'brother'; and a man we can always be proud of, for having represented us and our holy faith on the island of Chotako with the utmost charity, courtesy, and good Christian love.

"Oh, my brothers, how the Church could use more men like him! To firm the slipping bulwarks of what we hold to be true, to keep God-loving men and women everywhere 'on their toes,' and sensible to those things expected of us in Christ!

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Peruzzi dug around in his soutane slit like and old country lawyer for his cigar lighter. Finding it, he squinted out at his audience of forty-odd monsignori and bishops without portfolio. Peruzzi puffed until his cigar got going.

"We recall the words of Our Lord's, do we not, my friends? Some phrase about the salt of the earth, and another one about the lilies of the field? I think it is our duty to consider Father de Veaux as among those gaily arrayed in heaven this day, like the lilies in Christ's parable. For he was what Jesus spoke of.

"But again, Christ asked, 'What is there left when the salt hath lost its savor?' And this is the matter before us now. How difficult to hold onto that savor, to save that strength until the last moment, even unto death, to be heroes for Christ! The truth is that but few of us come up to the impeccable standard set for us by God. The lists of the Beatific bear homage to those men and women who ran the race but fell just short of the elusive mark of sainthood.

"And in the end, Bernard de Veaux, we feel, may have been too human to lift to that height. The worm of fear that twisted inside his soul -- he may never have conquered it; to the end he was bothered by neurotic compulsions. Even his hour of death" -- and here Peruzzi caught MacConacht's eye with a glint of the *innuendum* to come -- "and permit me to say that it is not our wish to further the speculations of the popular press, and repeat that unrepeatable slander, to wit, that Father de Veaux somehow escaped from King Betel's braves, and left his martyrs holding the bag, as we say today; but even that our of -- we shall call it *death* -- does not ring out to us across the years, across the vast oceans, as that purest of gifts meted out by the Almighty, the shedding of holy blood!

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"Bernard de Veaux had his chance. He could have gone to his death and spared his enemy, Charles Roubaix, the same fate. But he did not. It is Roubaix' grave that we see today in the sand of Chotako; the grave of Bernard is nowhere to be found. I will leave it to the popular press to speculate further on these matters; still, even we in this hall must wonder what *really* happened, and ask ourselves: Can this unsolved mystery but redound to the discredit of our 'saint'?"

Peruzzi affected a note of genuine, heartfelt sorrow. "Perhaps there is grace to be gotten from leniency," he said. "And perhaps we do well to be humble, to shrug off these unpleasant intimations as undignified and unworthy of this court, and stand instead in support of this amiable man who knew no terrible sin. It is true, my brothers: our judgments do indeed hang by slender and all too-human thread. But don't we do better, as Christian men, to commend his soul straightway to God, but find against our plaintiff's final, absolute, and unalterable sanctity?"

It was a splendid presentation, half-Hildebrand and half-Clarence Darrow. Patrick MacConacht nearly stood and applauded his new hero. But he knew no demonstration was necessary at this point. The de Veaux case had been open-and-shut from the start -- too many questions about the good priest's character, too little solid information on his actual fate. The vote was finally at hand, within an hour or so, and Patrick MacConacht had no doubt what the final tally would be. Within two hours *he* would be Rome's newest hero, not the hypochondriac from Clermont-Ferrand.

Except that some scandal was erupting by the rear entryway. A dozen hoary heads turned to assess the commotion. It appeared that two men were attempting to get past the security officer. One of the

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men seemed scarcely up to the task: except that he was so terribly frail and shrunken-looking, the guard might have laid hands on them both and booted them down the staircase. MacConacht peered at the other man -- it was his Greek teacher from the minor seminary in Philadelphia, Brother Ivo!

"What the Devil is he doing here?" the young priest asked no one in particular.

"Why, they are of your order," said Peruzzi in his clipped English. "Who is the older man?"

MacConacht shrugged, and the two brothers made their way down the center aisle, Ivo assisting the little one with both hands. When they came to the committee chairman, it was Ivo who spoke first.

"My friend wishes to make a statement," he said. And the committee chairman naturally moved to deny the unusual request, coming as it did just before the final vote, but owing to the tiny ancient's exceeding frailty, he acceded. The venerable monk was shown the witness' table, and he sat down with Ivo beside him, with Ivo speaking directly into the old man's ear.

Father MacConacht was at first intrigued by the proceedings but finally he was embarrassed, as he realized that his ridiculous order would go to any lengths to stall a vote, even hire some old character actor to come in and meander through some third-hand hearsay. He was not worried; he even propped his feet up on the first drawer of his desk, and put his hands behind his head and yawned. That would show his order he was not afraid of them!

Peruzzi approached the little man. "What is your name?" he asked.

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The little man whispered into Ivo's ear and Ivo, whose voice and Italian must both have been better than the old man's, answered for him:

"My name is Brother Reuben. I have come all the way from Lackawanna, New York State, to testify in the matter of Bernard de Veaux. I have something to say, and when I am finished, there is something you must all see. I beg your forgiveness for appearing before you so late in the proceedings, but I did not know of this committee until just the other day. But now that I am before you all, I will prove for a fact that Bernard de Veaux is a saint in the bosom of our father Abraham, and in the eyes of Almighty God."

The committee room scurried with excited whispers, but the little monk merely closed his heavy lids. The magistrate, aggravated but resigned to the last-minute interruption turned the interrogation over to Peruzzi. But it was clear from the opening remarks that Ivo would be reading his answers from a text prepared in the elder's shaky scrawl.

Brother Ivo read. "I have been a monk in the Society of Bernard since before it took that name, when we went by the name of the Brothers of the Ocean of God. I have been a monk for sixty-one years. I am 103 years old in June.

"That left me many other years to sin in, and I sinned greatly in all of them. I came to God at the age of 42, to put to an end a lifetime of hatefulness, egoism, blasphemy and pride. You see, mine has been a vocation by penance...."

Father MacConacht, hands behind his head, called out to the stand. "Objection, dear brother -- can't you skip the embroidery and

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get on with the testimony? Make your point -- that is, if you have one to make."

The room hummed with laughter and interest. Ivo and Brother Reuben put their heads together again. Finally the tiny monk got to his feet, his head shaking, and surveyed his audience. When he spoke, he spoke in a high-pitched, fluttering voice.

"My name, Reuben, was given me as a joke. My true name is one you know. I am Charles Roubaix."

Brother Reuben had before him a long afternoon of testimony, more than the old man seemed capable of giving, full of cross-examinations, clarification and repetition. But his first interruption came now, and it took the form of a loud thud, traceable to the sound of Father MacConacht's chair falling over backward, him in it, kicking and gurgling helplessly.

the dinghies of men

and the wiles of God

Bishop Peruzzi was the first to leap to Father MacConacht's assistance, helping the surprised young priest rise from the ignominy of his tipped-over chair. MacConacht brushed himself off with haste and embarrassment and seated himself afresh -- squarely, this time -- and listened to Brother Ivo narrate the old man's deposition.

"We had different kinds of fathers," Ivo read, "and therein, from the beginning and without our understanding it, lay our antagonism. Monsieur de Veaux was the organist and choirmaster at the Church of St. Bartholomew's in the village of Alois, while my father was chief of accounts with a brokerage firm in Clermont-Ferrand. And yet both men as boys had attended diocesan seminary for at least a

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year. I don't know what Bernard's reason for quitting was, but I do remember my own father complaining bitterly, years later, that the priests had told him he had no vocation. And so he soured on all things priestly, on the church and all its pieties, and devoted himself to making a fortune in the securities exchange.

"I am ashamed to tell you that he grafted his anticlericalism onto his son whole. How foolish I was all those years, imagining my ideas and my opinions were mine alone! Yet how absurd it sounds, that a man might inherit his loneliness -- for that, in a nutshell, is the history of my sin.

"Bernard was simply another boy in my class at the academy of Francois Champignon. I did not know him well, for my family was above his socially. But Champignon singled out the two of us to confide his ambitions of global adventure, of sailing the seven seas for Christ. He was particularly infatuated with the Solomon Islands, believing them to be exactly opposite Clermont-Ferrand on the planet's face, and he often mentioned a medium-sized island in the archipelago named Chotako which might, for aught he knew, be Paradise. Poor Francois -- he never suspected the contempt I bore him. It was one thing for him to share what he knew of geography and mathematics with me, but I could see he shared his heart's true secrets with the dimwit, de Veaux! I was jealous of Bernard, and I was spurned, I thought, by my teacher, Champignons -- but I ever admired the adventurer in him, forever dreaming of the Paradise across the seas he would never set clubbed foot upon!

"Had I been a more honest boy, my jealousy might not have grown, but I was always perverse, and far too clever for my own good. I made the dullard Bernard my target, and whittled away at him with my rapier wit more often and more viciously than I think

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he even suspected. Yet he never took offense. And clever me, I mistook his good-heartedness for stupidity!

"I left school in my twelfth year to further my education at Schulpforta, where at last I found a kindred spirit, in a classmate from Naumburg. Friedrich was cleverer than I in every respect, yet he endured me and taught me many dark and contemptible things. If my view of the world was jaundiced when I entered Schulpforta it was black when I emerged again!

"My father was fool enough to take me into business with him, and secure me for me a suitable marriage. I displayed a knack for finances and in no time at all found myself comfortable ensconced among the banking class, with a wife, a daughter, and another on the way. But none of that was enough; no sooner did I succeed in that world than I despised it utterly. I screamed to my father that I was meant for more than the moneylender's trade; I scolded my wife, I told her I was put on earth to create. Late at night I could be found in the cellar, mixing my first paints, making my first sketches, to prove to the world it had underestimated me. But no one noticed, or cared, and in my loneliness I abandoned them all, as a ship cuts anchor in a storm.

"In December of 1863 I broke free from all their bourgeois pleasantries, set sail for Liverpool for the Cape Route to the South Seas, laden with supplies for art and life. I brought trunkfuls of trinkets for the simple savages I intended, sight unseen, to portray on my canvasses. Chotako would be my Paradise, and I would be its new, white Adam -- with one striking difference from the original, my friends: I would breathe life into my *own* clay. In a land far from God, *I* would be God.

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"Alighting on Chotako in March, I was greeted with greatest enthusiasm by the natives, who say in me the fulfillment of some arbitrary island myth. These were the beach-people, the Low-Brows, the ones who imagined themselves the island cosmopolites. The Low-Brows imagined I had come to save them from the predations of the highlander savages, the High-Brow headhunters. I accepted their gifts with graciousness and did not contradict them. I would be their savior, I let them know -- but first they must furnish me with certain propitiations and tithes. So it was, that even before I had them build my cottage by the sea, even before I began the first of my romantic seascapes, and even before I established my export firm, Roobinoo Enterprises, Ltd., the line of young virgins, male and female, formed propitiously to the right. In no time at all I had made good on my preliminary objective, to install myself as God. Thereafter, I made mistakes. I underestimated the dangers in being God.

"Oh, I believe there were falser gods before me. At least I knew a thing or two about the world. Virginity, I explained to them, had fallen well out of fashion nearly everywhere else -- why did the Low-Brows drag their feet? They had been looking for something or someone to adore for what seemed like forever. I was everything they could have wanted, and more.

"They were so much better off with me than without me. Who did they have, before I arrived, who would smile beneficently when things were going well, but would affect a sour countenance when typhoons were at hand? Who else would give them the gift of chicken pox, marking every one of them as my chattel? Whom did they know was clever enough to mark off the entire island into rectangular plots, and parcel off the beachhead squares to shareholders? Before my arrival not one islander spoke French, but

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I took several of the youngest and most promising and taught them what I knew. Young Iluki was among this select group. And when I was done with them, I sent them, like the angel at Eden's gate, to make their way through the world.

"Admittedly, I did not extend the 'White Father' the warmest of welcomes. Father de Veaux seemed such a fool to me, and his presence in my efficient little theocracy was completely unacceptable, and I told him so. Go away, I said. No room here for two gods! Besides, I drew myself up stiffly, my god was here in person, whereas his was merely opening a branch office!

"But de Veaux disregarded my counsel, saying that if he failed to convert the islanders, he could still manage to *subvert* my godhead. So much for school spirit, eh gentlemen? Back in Puy-de-Dome we had a nice French Catholic phrase for such as him: *le chien du jardinier*, he who, unable to eat, denies others that pleasure.

"And so this dog began to build his little church, right there in my manger. With the help of that infidel Iluki he erected a place of worship. I wish you could have seen it, my brothers -- there on the majestic expanses of that beautiful beach of grass and dune sat this claustrophobic chapel of palm-log and thatch! Yet while the materials were native, the spirit of it was unmistakably French, and provincial French at that. For that was Bernard's style: his mission was ever run like a village parish, with weddings, summer socials, rosary nights, fish fries, the works. Singlehandedly Bernard de Veaux had brought ecclesiastic mediocrity to the Pacific!

"It was a phenomenal impudence, reeking of colonial stupidity, and what was worse, the Low-Brows, among whom I'd made such striking progress, backslid crazily, taking to this interloper with

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remarkable and impetuous warmth, mimicking his stutter, tipping hats they weren't wearing, confusing everything he said.

"Did you realize that his parishioners never knew the name of Jesus? They were all under the impression, owing to the vagueness of the *beche-de-mer*, that the name of Christ was Sivu-Pleii, which baffled me for months until I realized the Low-Brows were adopting Bernard's commonest phrase -- "if you please" -- to stand in place of the entire religion. This idiocy, from people who only a year earlier had had the perspicacity to worship *me*!

"I was a fool, I told myself they were simply humoring the nitwit priest. Still I was baffled, and I was blind to the fact that the Low-Brow people had, each and every one of them, fallen in love with the funny man from France. Neither could I see that he loved them in return. Or that, finally, he loved even me. How was I to see that the island prophecy was coming true after all?

"As the years passed my feelings toward the invader only hardened. Bernard always insisted he had only the interests of the islanders' souls at heart, and yet he moved among them in his mild way, preaching against me, against what he called the greed of Roobinoo Enterprises, Ltd., and the falseness of the Roobinoo's claim to divinity. The Low-Brows regarded Bernard as my father, come to chastise me and fetch me back to my proper world. And so I became a comic figure to those who once worshipped me. It was maddening. Worse, I saw that more than my divinity was at stake, and that my very solvency was on the line! I complained most bitterly to Bernard, to no avail. He told me he wished me peace and the love of Christ but he could not approve my exploiting his parishioners. And I replied that his actions not only violated my

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sense of religious freedom, but they also constituted restraint of free trade, and that I could not permit.

"And so I acted. I sent a messenger to the High-Brow king up in the hills, suggesting we meet to discuss what I perceived was a threat to Betel's hegemony in the island interior. Along with that message I attached a gravure of Innocent XIII, circa 1492, in triple tiara and quadruple chin. The white priest, I said, is this man's agent.

"My ploy was successful. King Betel sent his runner forthwith inviting me inland for a pow-wow.

"Now, in my eight years on Chotako I had never met King Betel face to face, but my intelligence reports had it that the king fell somewhat short of Isaac Newton in intellect. I was nevertheless startled, however, upon making my trip upland to the king's headquarters, at the magnitude of his dimness.

"I remember that I first offered him a cigar, and he, to be polite, quickly bolted half the thing down before I could stop him. And when I offered him a light he told me No thanks, he'd had enough already. When I entered his hut, and beheld the stretched-skin head of a particularly loutish-looking islander mounted on a ceremonial canoe atop his hearth, he merely nodded and allowed that, Yes, his father was much more the thinker than he was, but that *he* was the superior fighter. And he grinned.

"Stooping beside His Highness I advised him, with all gravity, that events might soon put his talents to the test. And he, gagging on cigar juice but too much of a man to concede the point, nodded like a diseased goat.

"Tell me more about this threat,' said Betel.

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"Well, Excellency,' I explained, 'you probably are aware that there is another white man, like myself, down on the beach, living among the Low-Brow peoples. That white man, I fear, means you and your posterity harm.'

"Betel looked at me sternly. 'How much harm do you mean me?' he asked.

"No, no,' I told him, 'not me, the *other* white man, the White Father.' And I explained that the White Father sought to break the line of King Betels with his royal self, which meant there would never be 846 successive King Betels, which was the perfect, round number, the interruption of which meant the great Blue Auk rising from its ocean-bed sleep and laying waste to the world, unless he, Betel, did something, quick.

"Hearing this, Betel nodded and appeared troubled. 'This is not good,' he said with some effort. And looking at me again, he said, 'You, go. Betel will do a deed.' And I left Betel's head-house exultant, and descended to water's edge with the sounds of new drums encircling me. I have never slept so peacefully as I did that night, secure that soon the beaches would be mine again.

"I wakened in the morning, startled to see my victim, Bernard, standing beside my hammock, along with Iluki. Bernard was more agitated than I had ever seen him.

"I have just returned from the High-Brow camp,' my rival informed me, 'where King Betel challenged me to show the power of my gods. When I was unable to, he condemned us both to death, at the end of seven days!'

"I feigned sympathy with his plight. 'Why, this is dreadful,' I said, 'the two of you, unfairly condemned to die.'

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"No, my friend,' Bernard corrected me. 'Iluki and I are not condemned. *You* and I are condemned.'

"I knew at once that something had gone wrong -- it was the island myth, caught up with me at last. If I was Bernard's son, that made the two of us a dynasty in the islanders' eyes. It would not do to murder the father and allow the dauphin to survive to avenge him. For once, I was without a clever retort, as Bernard filled me in on the decree, to wit, that after one week of freedom Betel's men would come for us. The seven-day interval was King Betel's notion of clemency -- we were free to swim our way past the island's notorious pack of sharks. But Betel failed to reckon with our European know-how, and Bernard and Iluki at once pitched in with me to build a boat to sail to the nearest island, forty miles away. Within a few hours the three of us were already busy sawing palm-logs and boiling coppera sap to use as pitch.

"We worked like dogs, from sunup to sunset, every day, stretching the boards and slotting them into place, lashing them together where they joined. While Bernard and I put our hands to fashioning a rudder from my old tennis racquet, Iluki worked with thimble and thread, sewing and cutting altarcloths to make sails.

"The drums began the day before our deadline arrived, and by dawn of the appointed day we were almost ready to set sail. Far up the beach I could hear the chant of the High-Brow warriors. All the Low-Brows hid in their huts, their doorflaps pulled tight behind them.

"It's time we were off,' I said, taking my new friend Bernard by the cuff. But de Veaux slipped free from me.

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"Remember,' he told me, 'the reef curls around, north by northeast as you reach the tip of the peninsula. Champignon would never forgive us if you broke up on the rocks at such an hour.'

"But, Bernard,' I said, 'surely you are coming as well?'

"Bernard frowned. 'I can't,' he said, then smiled. 'Though I believe you have the most wonderful journey ahead of you now. But as for me, my work here goes on.'

"Why?" I called to him as I waded out to the rocking boat. 'There's nothing here for you. Look! Down the beach -- Betel's henchmen! They'll kill you!"

"But Bernard walked out to the starboard side only to embrace me, and wish me God's speed. And after he helped me push off, he waved at me, and smiled his old schoolboy grin, and whispered, 'Au revoir.' No sooner did he say this than the High-Brow party pounded out into the waves and laid hands on him, and led him away.

"Do you understand, my bishops, what I am telling you? Bernard de Veaux helped his worst enemy to escape, but remained behind to accept certain death for himself. And why? Because I conspired to bring him down. It was me -- I killed Bernard de Veaux, and not the old dope Betel. Betel was merely -- an instrument of the Almighty -- a nincompoop who thought all white men looked alike!"

Father MacConacht sank his face into his hands. The two monks at the witness stand were destroying him. He glanced over at Bishop Peruzzi, who sat listening with a rapt expression on his face, which struck MacConacht as unprofessional. The burlap bundle which the two monks had brought in with them still sat on the table

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marked Exhibits between them. MacConacht sighed and listened as Brother Ivo continued to read from the deposition:

"And so Betel's men beset Bernard. I, who had paddled several hundred meters out to sea, put down my paddle and watched the drama I had helped instigate.

I was struck by the businesslike attitude of the warriors, who, high on their beverage of betel juice and kava, went about their vision-chore with a dazed efficiency, binding Bernard's hands behind him and striking him repeatedly across the face with their cuffs of shark-leather.

"And one other thing -- I noticed the look on Iluki's face as he watched alongside, holding out his hands to his friend but being shoved to the ground by one of the warriors. How odd Iluki seemed to me of a sudden, lying passively on the beach as his master was taken from him by force! I realized then just how devoted Iluki was to Bernard, and how superficial the boy's silly westernisms in fact were. Atop that perfect imitation-French tongue, I told myself, was a skull that was Low-Brow through and through: kindhearted and compassionate and giving. I stopped and began to recount the number of hearts I had broken in one day.

"And most heart-breakingly I watched the patient smile on my enemy's face as he motioned the warriors to stop for a moment, while Iluki embraced him one last time, and patted his cheek. How crushed I was then, sitting in my proud little boat on that endless ocean. How shamed I was by what I witnessed, and what baseness I beheld in my heart, compared to the heart of him whom I betrayed!

"My friends, my brothers, never suppose that God is without his wiles. I can tell you from the depths of all I know to be true that

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God is forever laughing above our own laughter, taking our puny cleverness into his great account and matching it a thousandfold, his Wit to our wit!

"In my case, the joke was the joke of an unshamable man brought down to the most scorched and most bitter disgrace -- the terrible shame of being saved, at the price of his own death, by my own worst enemy, a man for whom I knew nothing but scorn.

"Before that hour I had hated God with all my heart, as a sort of instinct, as an unholy wind that blew within me. I looked at his vaunted love for men and his love for his creation, and I turned away and chose to see instead an indifference, a coldness. When God called to me and touched my soul and pointed to the good that was in even such as me, I insisted I see only wickedness -- in me, in him.

"Indeed I even concocted a formula -- I imagined that in all the world there was but one thing missing, one thing preventing me from replacing God altogether, and Charles Roubaix taking his rightful place on the almighty throne. And that one thing was my knowing I could never match the arrogance of God, his insane jealousy, and the despicable cruelty he visits hourly upon his children, us!

"It sounds like flattery -- but whom do I flatter, God or myself?

"Somehow I managed to overcome the wave of revulsion that threatened to capsize me and my little boat, and I began instead to paddle back toward the island, piloting the dinghy to a cove clustered with young green palm. I hid the boat as best I could under a canopy of fallen fronds, and made my way, crashing through

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the brush, along an alternate route uphill into the jungle, to the domain of King Betel.

"As I bushwhacked my way closer and closer, I began to hear voices chanting, and the pounding rhythms of the booboos resounding in the jungle air. Apart from these drums the forest was strangely quiet -- the parrots were mum, the monkeys had quit their badinage and upbraiding, the constant clamor of the tropical woodpeckers seemed far, far away. I glanced about, almost hoping for the customary dangers -- the python, the hornet, the scaly centipede -- but all had gone into hiding. I sensed from the quiet that the entire forest had deferred to the greater drama waiting ahead of me. And I still did not know where I was headed, or what I intended to do when I got there. I knew only that I was *damned* if I would benefit from a gift I lacked the courage to witness the giving of.

"I came to the permanent encampment of Betel, in a clearing along the cliffs of the Chotako highlands. I tiptoed across the soft jungle loam until I found a stand of bamboo dense enough to hide behind, as a screen, and I knelt there to watch.

"There on his thatched throne sat King Betel XLVIII, his hands resting palms-down on his armrests of whalebone and skull. He gestured with his chin to one of the warriors, signifying that the prisoner should be brought out for the conclusion of their ceremony. Two stalwarts with bared middles -- they had enlarged their members by inserting twigs under the foreskins -- lumbered toward a mud hut, and dragged from it a figure in black. I could not help whimpering where I hid -- it was Bernard, and in the most frightful condition!

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"They dragged him by the pits of his arms, as his feet hung uselessly from his legs, both of them having been pounded to a red pulp by the High-Brows' beating-sticks. His shoes were purple with blood; likewise his hands dangled at the wrists, crushed and bleeding.

"But most heart-rending to me was what they had done to this gentle priest's face, for it was cruelly riddled now with dozens of stinging coral thorns, so that his face was a kind of pincushion of terrible spines. And as they dragged him across the encampment to Betel's throne, he rolled over and over in his agony, helpless to prevent the spines from piercing ever deeper.

"At a frame of palm-logs not unlike our soccer goal, they laced him up, hands tied to the upper rafter, spread apart, his weight resting horribly on his crushed feet and ankles. And as King Betel stood before his victim and tugged at his own leather cinch, and laughed, and goaded the priest with mocking questions, and as all assembled joined their king in his merriment, I beheld for the first time the expression on Bernard's face.

"All I will say is that no one must ever suppose that agony for God's sake is not agony still. Did Bernard cry out? He did not. Could he have cried out? That I do not know. But he moaned most awfully, and did little to subdue the outward signs of his suffering. Yet he did not scream -- somehow his complaints stopped short of the cry for justice which might have split the air of that cruel encampment, and risen upward to the ear of God as the roaring of one just man. Is it possible, I asked myself, that Bernard believed God's mercy was already upon him?

And so Betel, satisfied that the weakling priest could provide him no further entertainment, turned him over to his torturers and,

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popping a few more betel nuts into his mouth, eased back into his throne. While he chewed until his lips oozed red foam, the torturers had their way with the dying priest.

"My friends, until that day I had imagined that I understood these people, I thought I could 'read' their limited expressions and simple tastes. I would never have dreamed that people of such ostensible unsophistication could have developed any science to the height of subtlety to which they had brought torture.

"But consider: while I hid in the bushes, watching, the two torturers took turns for the better part of an hour, excising with an obsidian blade the sinews from Pere Bernard's neck and throat; somehow they know exactly where the major blood vessels were, and they eased their razor-sharp stones gently about both artery and vein; and each chunk of muscle they removed they held up to the priest's eyes, dangling the bleeding meat for him to see, then popped it into the other's mouth, to swallow whole! As if his living flesh were no more than a bite of herring, or pickled tomato!

"The flow of blood was horrible to watch, and so, too was the jerking and sagging of the priest's stripped neck and throat. When he could no longer hold up his chin, his torturers rearranged his bonds, piercing his ears with coral spines and running coconut cord through each one, and tying the new cord atop the stretching frame, so that the priest was now suspended by his head and arms. How gruesome it was, the kindly priest held up to view, his head jerked up, his dissected throat sprinkling the air with fresh gulps of blood, his eyelids peeled away from now-bulging eyes, the expression in them at once tearful, forgiving, and sad!

"But there is only so much in any man, and even a saint is only a man. When the bulging eyes began to glaze, King Betel, who sat

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picking his gapped front teeth with Bernard's rosary cross, signalled uninterestedly to his men to complete the deed.

"The first torturer woke Bernard from his trance with a slap to one cheek. And as the light reappeared in those blue French eyes for the last time ever, the other man lifted his blade, danced two full circles, stamped his feet, turned, and in one swift motion separated hanging head from trunk.

"The body collapsed, but the head hung, swinging from the ear-cords. Bernard's expression had not changed. To the end, and even now, after the end, there was something peculiar in his eyes, something simultaneously empty and full. Empty of -- regrets, I suppose; and full, even in death, of a neighborly love.

"And I, hiding in my bamboo blind, hid my face in my hands. I had engineered this tragic day. Never have I felt such mortification or such stunned sorrow. I wanted to weep for a hundred years!

"But even in my grief I was still a fool, for when I heard footsteps my resolve went slack, I trembled with terror, and looked about for an escape. A sickening thought occurred to me: justice might yet be done this day! (You see why some men are saints and others can never be.)

"The footsteps were Iluki's. He too had crept near to watch the holy martyrdom, and his cheeks too were stained with tears. Kneeling in the dirt we embraced, and wept most bitterly."

a vaudeville hook,

a usable book

Santo Uomobuono Office Bldg.

Michael Finley, THE MEGAPODE

Vatican City

March 2, anno domini 1932

Dearest Father MacConacht,

I send you the warmest wishes of all the friends you made in your brief career in the Holy City. We remember and will not soon forget your vivacious spirit, or the conviction with which you assaulted a problem, or your all-together "American" fighting nature!

Two things impel me to write, Patrick. First I wish to extend to you my congratulations on your new assignment. Now, I suspect you are not yet regarding it with great fondness yourself, and this concerns me. I wish to suggest to you, my friend, that the Curia is full of men -- I count myself among them -- who would gladly forego the pomp and power, ceremony and intrigue of the Vatican to be put "out to pasture" as you have been. Never forget, Patrick, that the Holy City is a terrible tower of offices, doors, ropes, windows, typewriting machines and file-cabinets; but that atop that terrible tower there still reposes a simple shepherd of men. And, while I considered you marvelously gifted for this life, and whereas I was certain you had it within yourself to scale that terrible tower and find yourself an office, a door, a rope and a window near to the top, consider what you have accomplished simply by leaving: Presto -- you are home, and surrounded by your flock. Will you believe me if I say I envy you?

Patrick, there are so many better things to be in this world than a clerk of the Vatican. Here I sit, so near to the brain of Christ, but so far -- so very far -- from His heart! Do you remember the adage, "Better governor of Idumaea than junior lieutenant in Rome"? Well,

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my friend, the minor seminary in Philadelphia will be your Idumaea. Take heart, then, and work the will of Christ wherever he finds you. Celebrate His grace, and your opportunities!

Secondly, I wish you to know that I never expected you to accompany the rest of our deliberative body back to Chotako for yet another visit, to examine the newly-determined grave of Bernard de Veaux. I knew then that the revelations of Brother Reuben were a grave disappointment to you personally, and I made apologies for your absence. But also I must tell you what you missed.

The old monk was correct to the tiniest detail. We located the grave marked with the name Charles Roubaix not far from the retaining wall which, as the Roobinoo, he had constructed near his cottage. We paused a moment and admired the grave, the stone casting a perfect shadow on the swept white sand around it. But within a few minutes of disturbing the sand we unearthed the cedar chest. You can imagine the excitement of our party as our bearers pried open the box, every priest exhilarated by his own thoughts. I thought of the story of Thomas a` Kempis, author of our beloved *Imitation*, whose chances of canonization were dashed when his grave was opened, and there lay poor Thomas, his skull gnarled and twisted, as if by despair! What would we find here, at our feet, beneath the white Solomon sand?

We found something both awesome and awful.

For it could have been no other than our missing saint in the box, for the *corpus* was without its *caput*! But that in itself was not our sign. Our sign was the mysterious condition of the body below: the flesh was intact; and yet not intact. I mean, the body was fresh, as if he had died the week before, but there was something wrong -- the flesh was torn and desiccated and turned inward upon itself. The

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diagnosis was inescapable: leprosy. All his life Father de Veaux had had a strange sense of the disease, twitching and complaining at the end and complaining of the burning sensation, the loss of feeling in his extremities, the soreness in his lips and ears, and no one believed him. But here was our evidence, as a sign of favor from above, that something unexplainable had transpired: in life he struggled with leprosy's pains, but only in death did he exhibit its marks.

Awful, as I say, and awesome. It was a lesson to us all, that a miracle need not be aesthetically pleasing. The committee knelt where we were, on the clean white sand, and prayed, and sang his anthem, with its new-found meaning, "Thank You, Lord (For Sparing Me the Cup)".

Patrick, I wish you had been there. Perhaps then you could better face what must seem to you to be a demotion. Perhaps you would see which role the two of us were chosen to play in our little drama. We were not *laughing-stocks*, my friend; we were what, in your American vaudeville, are called the *straight-men*, who set the world up for the humor of God!

I commend this cheer to you with my very best wishes for your success and for your soul's progress in grace, and other commendations through Christ our Savior!

Your "junior lieutenant" in Christ,

Atanasio Peruzzi, S.J., S.T.D.

Patrick MacConacht folded the letter and reinserted it in the original envelope. He did not get much mail anymore -- the minor seminary wasn't the hub of exciting correspondence that Rome was. He pushed his chair away from his desk and walked to the window overlooking the seminary basketball courts and playing fields.

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Below he could make out a scrimmage between the two halves of the sophomore class. He shook his head with dismay. Bishop Peruzzi's letter was no comfort to him. He would never forget the humiliation the old Roobinoo, Brother Reuben, dished out to him in his last minutes of testimony back in Rome:

MacConacht had sat at his table, his hands folded before him in defeat. A worried expression furied his face, and his eyes stared, deadpan, at the burlap package on the exhibit stand as Brother Ivo continued to read from the older monk's testimony.

"Having witnessed the holy martyrdom of my friend Bernard de Veaux, the boy Iluki and I agreed to escape from Chotako together. But first we lay low for several days, for the High-Brows were intent on purging the island of white men for once and for all, and as I was Father Bernard's 'son,' and as Iluki was also, after a fashion, our lives remained in considerable peril.

"We lived in a jungle shelter several miles from the beaches which Iluki knew about, and we subsisted for some time on breadfruit and the meat of lizards which Iluki would catch with his hands. On the seventh day Iluki showed me how to bundle up food for our escape while he returned one more time to the High-Brow encampment.

"'To the High-Brows?' I asked him, bewildered. 'But why on earth go there?'

"But Iluki embraced me and said, 'There is something here which we dare not leave behind. If I do not return within three hours, Old Roobinoo, I suggest you leave without me.'

"I was through objecting, and I let him go, and rejoiced when, within the allotted time, he returned, carrying under one arm a

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leathern sack, which we place before you at this hearing today" -- Brother Ivo paused here to nod in the direction of the bag across from Father MacConacht -- "and the two of us went at dawn to the cove where the dinghy lay hidden, and pushed off.

"Taking little with us in the way of provisions we set sail to the north, hoping to catch sight of a random ship or, failing that, to land on the beaches at Tarawa. But the Solomon channels are uncountable, my friends -- if there were ships in the area we did not see them, not for days. And so, with our sail of altarcloths tattered by the breeze, we drifted. Iluki kept track of our time at sea, 26 notches cut into the oar, and no food save breadfruit, coconut milk, and the meat of two gulls who alighted among us on separate Sundays like Pentecostal doves!

"In such condition as we found ourselves it seemed appropriate to pray, and with my new friend's help I did pray. Some days all we did was pray, to help time under our scorched and salt-soaked sun pass by. And as the days wore on, and we wore out, I was amazed to hear my prayers inside me grow, and evolve, from laments and cries of distress, over many days' time, into songs of jubilation and praise. For my life was no longer my own, not in our little boat; now I belonged, like Champignon's band of provincial priests, to the Holy Ocean of God!

"God saw us through our journey. We were so blessed that on the feast of Easter, just after sunrise, we were finally spotted, bobbing unconsciously, and taken aboard an American steamer. We spent another week resting at Pearl Harbor on the Sandwich Islands before boarding ship again for San Francisco, where Iluki and his package wished me well, and we said goodbye.

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"I had made up my mind out on the ocean to travel to the retreat at Lackawanna in the state of New York, set up by Champignon's order, and offer them my services, such as they were, for the rest of my life. And this I did: for thirty years I worked as a laborer, planting bushes around the monastery, shoveling mountains of snow, preparing the good monks' morning coffee. In my thirty-first year I took on the mantle of monk myself, and in my thirty-third I received my first visitor, my old friend Iluki, who was dying, and had left his wife and seven children in San Francisco to journey to me to hand over his leathern bag. We enjoyed the sacraments together, and on the feast of the Little Flower, I laid Iluki to rest in my garden.

"But I have kept his gift until this day. And I bring it with me to edify you all."

Brother Ivo turned to his right. The tiny monk was tugging at his sleeve. The two conferred, Ivo nodding repeatedly. Finally Ivo looked up and pushed his own chair a step behind Brother Reuben's.

The 104-year-old man cast his eyes from face to face, as if reading them all. He settled finally on the forlorn face of Patrick MacConacht, who was rolling a cold cigar in one cheek. The old man's lips trembled as he spoke.

"Young man..." he said, pointing weakly in MacConacht's direction.

"Me?" MacConacht asked. And he laughed uncomfortably, looking around at the elders. "What do you want, Brother? How can I help you?"

The tiny man forgave MacConacht's patronizing tone. "Bring... the bag... if you please...."

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MacConacht rose and picked up the bundle from the exhibit table.

"Undo... the... twine..." the old man said.

And MacConacht untied the cord and opened the bag at the neck and withdrew from it a curious object, an old and battered breviary bound in a peculiar brown cover. The priest looked at the book with a puzzled expression, as did all the other members of the committee, standing at their tables to get a closer look.

MacConacht held the book flat in his hands. The cover was rough, with hundreds of stiff, reddish-brown hairs of clipped length hanging straight down the front. Horse's hair, he told himself. Underneath this mane was a beige-to-gray complected leather. Altogether it was the strangest bookbinding work MacConacht had ever seen.

The tiny monk cleared his throat. "You're looking... at it... upside down...."

Feeling the other side now with his fingertips, MacConacht felt his jaw drop. A tingling sensation rushed up through his fingers, rushing it to his brain. Slowly he turned the breviary over in his hands.

The front cover was the face of a human head, as the back had been the scalp. The lips of the face were shrunken and thin, and the nose lay flattened against the surface, nostrils flared. The mouth was open and oval, and behind it could be seen a gleaming mother-of-pearl backing. The eyelids were slit so that the eyes opened, their sparse lashes braided together, and the expression on the face was as peaceful and as constant as the face of the full spring moon.

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Father MacConacht looked out the third floor turreted window, down the myrtles slopes of the prep seminary and out over the playing fields below. Even as he watched a game of soccer was deteriorating into a fistfight between several of his charges, undistinguishable from that distance.

MacConacht sighed. The legacy of Bernard de Veaux continued. The school he ran was now called St. Bernard's Bluff. St. Bernard's Face was emblazoned on every seminarian's *Liber Usualis*, to remind him that even a hymnbook can be useful in achieving God's ends. The chapel had just installed a plaster statue of the saint -- a stock statue, which MacConacht had had to hand-paint himself, using too much rouge in the cheeks and too much ruby in the lips, so that Bernard de Veaux, standing amid his own little tabernacle, seemed as clownlike in the canon as he had in real life.

To cap it all off, Rome had just sent instructions to the effect that inasmuch as Father MacConacht, since the passing away of Brother Ivo, was the one man alive who understood the story of Bernard de Veaux, so it was proper, meet and just that he be assigned the blessed work of compiling de Veaux' authorized biography. *Wisdom of the Solomons*, he had decided to call it, *A Life of Saint Bernard de Veaux*.

Father MacConacht giggled to himself. He was giggling more and more these days. I must decreaseth as he increaseth, he thought, and giggled again. And he rolled another sheet of foolscap into his typewriter, and whistled a snatch of a tune he could not quite place.